## Supporting Students Experiencing Adjustment Problems as School Starts

*A Difficult School Year Ahead as Students,*
*Many of Them Already Behind, Return to Classrooms*

This news headline seems self-evident. The question it raises for schools is:

**What are the plans for supporting students seen as struggling**
**during their first weeks at school?**

Even before the pandemic, some students experienced difficulties adjusting to new classes, new schools, new teachers, new classmates, etc.

It is always poignant to see a student who is trying hard, but can't keep up.

Over the first few weeks, teachers realize quickly who has and hasn't made a good adjustment to their classrooms and to the school. That is the time to address any problems before they get worse. If adjustment problems are not addressed, student motivation for school dwindles, and behavior problems increase. The misbehavior often arises in reaction to learning difficulties or may be the result of problems at home.

### Prepare Teachers and Student/Learning Support Staff to Intervene Quickly

To proactively address the needs of students who are not adjusting well to school, staff development plans can include a focus on the type of strategies described below.

It is invaluable to have student support staff work with teachers *in their classrooms* to intervene before problems become severe and pervasive and require referrals for out-of-class interventions. As soon as a student is identified as having problems adjusting, a problem-solving process should be initiated. The process begins with efforts to enhance personal contacts and build a positive working relationship with the youngster and family.

The teacher and/or a student support staff member arrange a meeting to better understand the student's interests, capabilities, and the causes of the problem with the aim of working out ways to make things better at school. To these ends, the interchange explores

- the student's assets (e.g. positive attributes, outside interests, hobbies, what the youngster likes at school and in class)
- what the youngster doesn't like at school and the reasons for this (e.g., Are assignments seen as too hard? as uninteresting? Is the youngster embarrassed because others will think s/he does not have the ability to do assignments? Is the youngster picked on? rejected? alienated?);
- other possible causal factors

Based on what is learned from the meeting, possible actions to make things better are explored with the youngster and those in the home. The focus is on feasible changes that

- build on the student's assets and that deemphasize areas that are not of high interest
- provide extra support and guidance, including tutoring (e.g., from a volunteer, a peer, friend)
- provide temporary special assistance in the classroom as necessary
- stress strategies designed to enhance the student's engagement during learning activities and other facets of the school day (e.g., provide learning and enrichment options that are a good fit with the student's capabilities and interests; teach specific academic and social skills that are seen as barriers to effective classroom performance and learning.)

**Some Special Assistance Strategies**\*

If a student seems easily distracted, the following might be used:

- identify any specific environmental factors that distract the student and make appropriate environmental changes
- have student work with a group with others who are task-focused
- designate a volunteer to help whenever the student becomes distracted and/or starts to misbehave, and if necessary, to help make transitions
- allow for frequent "breaks"
- interact with the students in ways that will minimize confusion and distractions (e.g., keep conversations relatively short; talk quietly and slowly; use concrete terms; express warmth and nurturance)

If students need more direction, the following might be used:

- develop and provide sets of specific prompts, multisensory cues, steps, etc. using oral, written, and other guides as organizational aids related to specific learning activities, materials, and daily schedules
- ensure someone checks with the student frequently throughout an activity to provide additional support and guidance in concrete ways (e.g., model, demonstrate, coach)
- support students efforts related to self-monitoring and self-evaluation and provide nurturing feedback keyed to the student's progress and next steps

If the student has difficulty finishing tasks as scheduled, the following might be used:

- modify the length and time demands of assignments and tests
- modify the nature of the process and products (e.g., allow use of technological tools and allow for oral, audio-visual, arts and crafts, graphic, and computer generated products)

\*The need for special assistance is best identified through a response to intervention (RtI) assessment. Once the need is indicated, teachers can benefit from bringing a support staff member into the class to help implement strategies. Also, aides, volunteers, peer tutors/coaches, mentors, those in the home, etc. not only can help support student efforts to learn and perform, but can enhance the students social support network.

If nothing seems to be working, seek out collegial support and coaching.

- Ask for structured staff discussions and staff development (including observations) to learn what others are doing

- Ask that other staff (mentors, student support staff, resource teachers, etc.) be enabled to team with teachers in their classrooms to enable school adjustment

If all else fails, it is time to use the school's referral processes to ask for specialized support services. As such services are added, it is essential to coordinate them with what is going on in the classroom, school-wide, and at home.

For links to more resources related to the above, see the following Center Quick Finds

>*Transition Programs/Grade Articulation/Welcoming*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm

>*Classroom Focused Enabling*  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/classenable.htm

>*Motivation* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm

>*Response to Intervention* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/responsetointervention.htm

>*Special assistance* is covered in Chapters 9 & 10 of *Improving School Improvement*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/improve.pdf

The following free books may be helpful for staff who want to delve deeply into concerns related to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students:

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
Both can be accessed at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

*And don't forget about supporting new teachers – see*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/8-25-22.pdf